



the opened panels



Substituting wood carvings for detailed metal and beadwork, the upper part of the altar's recess is an intricate sculpting of natural themes. In the original Issenheim Altarpiece, Grünewald represented the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John with the Lion, the Bull, the Eagle and the Angel. These same symbols are used in the Keiskamma Altarpiece, all presented with wings in an angelic depiction.



In the central recess the Keiskamma artists have once again represented saints with local characters, and incorporated photographs of grandmothers and grandchildren printed to canvas.

The two side panels are a stark departure from Grünewald, where scenes of wilderness and temptation are replaced by the serene imagery of the Hamburg landscape, used as a final resting place for the names of those community members who have fallen to illness and who can now be remembered in dignity and peace.

TOP: The back recess is an intricate work of wire and bead sculpting creating a three dimensional depth to the altarpiece.

BELOW: Sepia portraits of grandmothers and their grandchildren have been printed to canvas, and represent those icons of the local villages who are holding the social fabric of their communities together.

THE ISSENHEIM ALTARPIECE

The statue of St. Anthony, enthroned between St. Augustine and St. Jerome, is surrounded by the two painted panels of the visit of St. Anthony to St. Paul and the Temptation of St. Anthony.



From the Issenheim Altar Catalogue of the Unterlinden Museum, 1991.



Listen closely
and you will hear
the singing of people





the intermediate presentation



Upon opening of the first set of winged panels, the darkness of despair triumphantly gives way to imagery of hope and local spirituality.

On the left is a well known, and locally iconic, wild fig tree filled with an abundance of birdlife and natural wonder. The tree shelters the communities around Hamburg who, as depicted in the central left panel, are protected in their traditional and orthodox spiritual beliefs and customs.



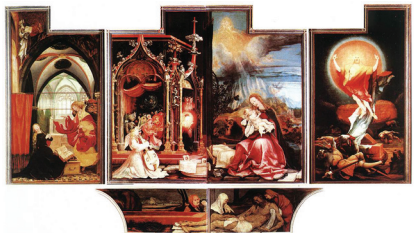
As in Grünewald's original, angels fly overhead while choirs sing on the ground. The central right panel portrays a local artist whose patterns in the sand dunes of Hamburg's beaches are considered prayers, and his shadow falls across the local landscape. His footprints extend to the far right panel where a circular geographic depiction of Hamburg, surrounded by ocean and sky, is reflective of the circle of light surrounding the resurrection of Christ in the complimentary Issenheim panel.

TOP: *The colour and richness of the Hamburg environment symbolises the natural abundance and fertility of the area.*

BELOW: *Detail of local sand artist Gaba (prophet), whose prayers are printed into the dunes of Hamburg during the early mornings following rainfall.*

THE ISSENHEIM ALTARPIECE

At Christmas, Easter and at all feasts of the Virgin, the altar was opened at the panels of the Annunciation, the Concert of Angels, the Nativity and the Resurrection - symbols of joy.



From the Isenheim Altar Catalogue of the Unterlinden Museum, 1991.

the keiskamma art project

*Listen closely and you will hear the singing of people
as united they realise a future of promise and prosperity*

Over many centuries an ancient river has weaved its path through the harsh, hostile, scrubland of South Africa's Eastern Cape Province. This river is called the Keiskamma and, with an unspoken certainty, it emerges from the thorn thickets of the hinterland to widen across a lush plain and into an estuary rich and fertile. It is here, at the river's mouth, where fresh and salt water merge between rolling hills, that the Keiskamma Art Project was born.

Located in Hamburg, the last village on the Keiskamma's course, the project is housed alongside a scattering of holiday cottages and a spread of rural African villages. The German name reveals only a thin slice of its history. Over the years, the area has been home to nomadic indigenous San people, transient black tribes and clans, white traders and settlers, and, recently, permanent settlements of the Xhosa people.

Hamburg is exquisite in its beauty and a verdant site for artistic creativity. Perhaps it is the energy of the landscape that has inspired local women to dust off the shackles of rural poverty and give life to their inherent talents and resourceful ambitions.

The Keiskamma Art Project is part of a wider thrust within Hamburg to rejuvenate and restore a landscape and a people fractured by generations of conflict and suppression. This sense of reawakening is woven into the daily fabric of life and finds expression in the efforts of the women whose lives are strengthened through the work of the project.

Today over one hundred women artists from the villages of Hamburg, Bodiam, Ntilini and Bell engage their craft through the activities of the project. Two studios have been renovated in Hamburg and a shop built to sell their products. Wider national distribution is actively sought and the International Friends of the Keiskamma Art Project is instrumental in ensuring exposure on foreign shores.



the keiskamma artists

*"I feel I have found the true purpose and meaning of my life,
working among the people of the Hamburg area."* CAROL HOFMEYR



NOKWANDA MAKUBALO
*"Before the project started, I was not working. I am a single mother and have four kids. Things are hard. It was very difficult in the beginning as the project was small. Now it is getting better and it is great for our self-esteem.
At the end of the day, you have not only made money, but you have produced something of which you are proud."*



NOSETI MAKUBALO
"I am happily married with six girls. I love them so much with my romantic husband Hamilton. I started at the Project in 2000. I came to sew, but I have ended up designing and drawing. It is a dream come true."



CAROLINE NYONGO
"I live with my husband, children and grandchildren. Before the project started, neither of us were working and we are struggling to send our children to university or college. The project helps those of us who do not go to school."



JACKIE DOWNS
"The artists have taught me so much. It is incredible to see what they offer on an artistic level with just as much fine art potential as anyone else in South Africa. Until now, circumstance has prevented them from expressing this ability."





the closed panels



In its closed state the Kieskamma Altarpiece reflects the same dark themes as its Issenheim inspiration. The central panels depict the crucifixion with the body of Christ replaced by the image of a Xhosa woman dressed in the traditional attire of a new widow. She is grieving for the loss of a spouse from AIDS. While Grünewald painted Mary Magdalena and St John on either side of Christ, the Keiskamma widow is surrounded by the children of her community, many orphaned, as well as the grandparents or elders who are increasingly called upon to adopt the orphans of AIDS.

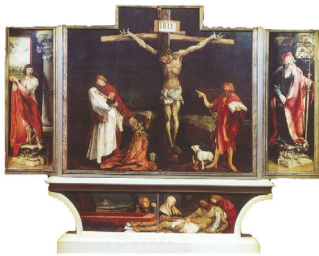


Like the Issenheim Altarpiece, saints flank the central panel. In the Keiskamma structure, the depicted saints are members of the local community. To the left is Susan Paliso, an elder and stalwart of Hamburg village. To the right is the late Leginah Mapuma, wearing the formal dress of members of the Anglican Church. A permanent panel at the base of the Keiskamma Altarpiece portrays the funeral of Dumile Paliso, son of Susan, who succumbed to AIDS in 2002. Illness and communal grief are illustrated.

TOP: As in Grünewald's original, where Christ's body is being prepared for entombment, so a victim ravaged by AIDS is dressed by nursing staff.
BELOW: Children and grandparents, often the unintended victims of AIDS, are positioned prominently in the central panels of the closed altarpiece.

THE ISSENHEIM ALTARPIECE

The closed altarpiece showed a vision of the Crucifixion, Christ's ultimate sacrifice, and at the same time presented to worshippers the images of St. Sebastian and St. Anthony (patron saint of the monastery and healer of the sick), both implored against illness. The horizontal view of the Entombment balances the vertical lines of the Crucifixion.



From the Issenheim Altar Catalogue of the Unterlinden Museum, 1991.



VERONICA MANGANGEBA

"I pray that God may bless me to have the powers to help my children get an education. I enjoy working with the project, as it helps me earn money and my new baby can stay with me while I work on the sewing machines."



TANYA JORDAAN

"I feel honoured to be part of a project that works to bring back a new kind of pride and dignity to people."



ARDWORK (EDDIE) JANGE

"My name is Ardwork (Eddie) Jange. I am 25 years old. I stay in Cape Town and am a wire and beads artist. I have worked for Streetwires as an artist for three years now. For the past two months I have been training the Keiskamma Art Project ladies in wire art."



NOVUYANE PEYI

"In 1998 I did electricity, but I had to quit halfway due to financial problems. I decided to do a sewing course ... in 2004, I joined the Keiskamma Art Project and am now coping better than ever before."



JAN CHALMERS AND JACKIE JEZEWSKI

Jan Chalmers and Jackie Jezewski have worked as volunteers with the women of the Keiskamma Art Project for the past five years, travelling from their homes in Oxford every six months to teach new embroidery stitches and techniques. In the UK, they promotes awareness of the project by selling its work, giving talks and arranging exhibitions.



a history of embroidery

Needlework as an art form is found throughout Africa, with differing styles reflecting the geographic areas of origin. In the Eastern Cape there was a distinct engagement and experimentation in the combination of needlework, appliqué (decoration through the cutting of material and attached to other material) and beadwork at the time of early contact with white settlers and traders in the eighteenth century. Imported cloth became widely available and clothing changed from leather to cotton.

With this introduction of cloth, early mission stations began to introduce needlework in school activities among Khoi children and then, later, within Xhosa settlements. By the mid-eighteenth century, heavy cotton cloth sheeting was worn by Xhosa speakers as skirts, shawls and headscarves, with elements of mother of pearl, beads and buttons included.

The Keiskamma Art Project has embraced these traditions and, with the direction of the local artists, expanded them into the production of handbags, cushion covers, quilts, linen and tapestries.

The designs are initially hand-drawn and then distributed among embroiders for completion.





construction of the keiskamma altarpiece

"The darkness that covered the earth for three hours during that (Good) Friday symbolized the blackness of their despair. And then Easter happened ... The incredible, the unexpected happened. Life triumphed over death, light over darkness, love over hatred, good over evil."

ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU
"An Easter Message"; Crying in the Wilderness: The Struggle for Justice in South Africa

Following centuries of conflict and suppression, South African rural communities are now struggling against an altogether different social scourge - HIV and AIDS. For many, it is difficult to comprehend - it is not a physical human foe - and its consequences can be devastating. Yet, for others it need not equate to despondency or hopelessness. From within comes the strength to defeat despair and to bring forth renewal and hope. These are sentiments and human emotions that are not unique to African nor indeed to modern times.

With inspiration from the powerful Issenheim Altarpiece of German painter Mathias Grünewald, the women artists of the Keiskamma Art Project have, through their embroidery, depicted the tragedy of the HIV and AIDS pandemic and the effect it has had on their social and cultural cohesion. It is believed that Grünewald painted the fear and terror of Christ's crucifixion for hospice patients in Germany suffering from ergot poisoning, which at the time, like AIDS today, was incurable. Yet, like Grünewald's altarpiece, which opens out to display hope, joy and resurrection, so the Keiskamma Altarpiece unwraps to reflect redemption and restoration through images of abundance, health and vitality.

Replicating the Issenheim original, the Keiskamma Altarpiece stands 4 metres in height and, when opened out to its full extent, spreads to some 6.8 metres. It consists of a double set of winged panels that open on a hinged axis to reveal a final permanent third panel depicting the restoration of a community previously embattled with disease. Each panel is a rich integration of embroidery (using the rare stumpwork stitch), appliqué and Xhosa beadwork. The back permanent panel includes an infusion of sculptural wire beadwork and photography.





the keiskamma altarpiece

Umaf' evuka, nje ngenyanga.

Literal translation: Dying and rising as the moon does.

(Xhosa proverb referring to a tenacious person who refuses to accept defeat despite repeated hardships.)







the keiskamma tapestry



a south african history reflected



While South Africa's might be a past of conflicting ambitions, its detail is closely reflected in the history of the Keiskamma region. It is a history that is painstakingly and chronologically captured in the 126 metres of embroidered panels making up the Keiskamma Tapestry.

As an artwork, the tapestry's conception has borrowed from the narrative tradition of the historic Bayeux Tapestry that today hangs in the Mont Saint Michel castle in Northern France. This records the conquest of Anglo-Saxon England by the Normans at the Battle of Hastings in 1066.

THE BAYEUX TRADITION AND THE KEISKAMMA TAPESTRY

The artists of Keiskamma have used the Bayeux tapestry as inspiration and guidance. By combining the same Bayeux embroidery stem and laid stitching, in the outlines and fill, the Keiskamma artists have, with their own repertoire of natural stitching and beading techniques, created an eclectic and surprising final artwork. Similar adaptation has seen the use of a spectrum of colours, thereby indicating a departure from the simple seven shades of the original Bayeux piece. Differing styles and methodologies should not, however, distract from the common visual journey through a people's history that is reflected in both tapestries.

A TRAVEL THROUGH TIME - KEY THEMES OF THE KEISKAMMA TAPESTRY

By combining their own traditional knowledge, orally engrained over decades, with written historical records, the women of the Keiskamma region began to weave a picture of a land originally filled with wildlife and devoid of human influence. With pressure from the north and then, later, from the south, the original nomadic San and Khoi inhabitants, whose lifestyles inflicted little impact on the surrounding environment, were displaced and replaced by pastoral Xhosa tribes dependent on the crops they grew and the livestock they carried.



1: The Nguni

The Nguni cow, endemic to southern Africa, is a symbol of wealth, strength and cohesion to numerous indigenous groupings. With their long-held lineage, these beasts take pride of place within the tapestry. Their presence, throughout this particular history, is indicative of the wealth and spiritual esteem imbued in cattle by the Xhosa people.

"As the herds increased, so did milk drinking, and with this new dietary staple complementing traditional crops, populations began to expand. Cattle became for their owners the first form of capital in southern Africa. They created individual wealth."

NOEL MOSTERT

Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People



2: Collision of Aspirations

It is in the Eastern Cape that the meeting of black and white aspirations for southern Africa first played itself out in earnest. The southward moving Xhosa clans were confronted by northward travelling white farmers, traders and colonisers. The clash of cultures tragically unfolded through numerous "frontier" wars that resulted in submission and subjugation, and finally in the apartheid system of "separate" development for white and black.



3: Revival

The Eastern Cape history of contention and skirmish is fought across the tapestry, yet, as in the history of South Africa itself, it culminates in a theme of restoration. As bloody as the history is, a serenity supported by the landscape prevails throughout the tapestry, and is embraced by a sense of renewal in the region's most recent history. Today, faced with social fragmentation and rural poverty, it is the women who have stood tall and embraced their history. They have expressed this ownership through their artwork, and the Keiskamma Tapestry is an embodiment of pride and, ultimately, restoration.

BOOKS OF INTEREST:

MOSTERT N; *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People*; 1992; Pimlico; London

MDA Z; *Heart of Redness*, 2001, OUP Southern Africa, Cape Town

BRIDGEFORD A; *1066 The Hidden History of The Bayeux Tapestry*, 2004, Harper Perennial, London

UNTERLINDEN MUSEUM; *Unterlinden: The Issenheim Altar*, 1991

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The National Arts Festival

The National Department of Arts & Culture

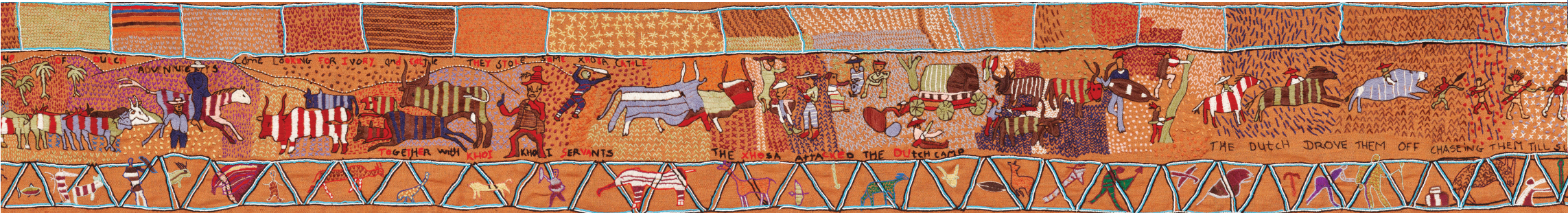
The Eastern Cape Department of Sport, Recreation, Arts & Culture

All individual donors who, through their own contributions, continue to turn the dream into reality.





PANEL 14: In 1686 the colonial ship the Stavinesse, sank off the Pondoland coast in the Transkei. It was the first recorded interaction between the black Xhosa tribes of the Eastern Cape and white Europeans. Many survivors were integrated into Xhosa tribes and married and lived among the Xhosa. They described a rural village life composed of domestic chores around the kraal. Hut making, repairs, making of stamp (meilie-meal), tending crops and looking after cattle, was very much the tradition - as it remains today in many rural areas.



PANEL 25: Having heard of the tall people with many cattle north of the Fish River, a party set from the Cape in 1702 with the purpose of illegal bartering for cattle, hunting and ivory trading. They claimed they were attacked while camping. The Dutch retaliated by rounding up several thousand cattle and plundering Khoi-khoi kraals on their way home.



PANEL 3: Women's empowerment, ownership of agricultural projects, child and disability grants and improved health facilities are just some of the services celebrated in the newly democratic South Africa. Instrumental in agricultural support in the Eastern Cape was former MEC for Agriculture.



PANEL 4: Political placards during 1994 acclaimed: "Your voice is your right. Your right is your voice." These voices are now letting their grievances be known, and acknowledgement of improvement also allows for grievance. Ambulances are few and far between, patients have to walk to hospitals, the wards are overcrowded, and doctors and nurses are overworked and underpaid.



PANEL 1: In traditional earth colours, the socio-economic dynamic of a pre-democratic rural South Africa is depicted. Basic services are unheard of, fire is used for heating and cooking, and paraffin lamps used for light. Men, as the head of rural households, are typically depicted as labourers or farmers. At the base of this existence is a determination among individuals and rural communities to talk to each other in defiance of the status quo that prevailed pre-1994.



PANEL 2: Democracy brought new services to the rural regions of Hamburg and people were united hand-in-hand. Government-funded housing was built and electricity, schools and community agricultural projects introduced. Thabo Mbeki was elected President of South Africa in 1999, coinciding with the unveiling of the new South African Coat of Arms, and thanks is given to the Eastern Cape MEC for Arts and Culture for her support of the Keiskamma Arts Project. Throughout the tapestry, trees are depicted as symbols of shelter and unification of all South Africa's people.



PANEL 27: The San, unable to understand the lifestyles of the pastoralist Xhosa and Dutch, became enemies of both and were driven northwards into the high ground of Graaf Rietnet. Meanwhile, in 1781, the Boers and Xhosa clashed when a party led by local frontiersman, van Jaarsveld, deceived the Dange Xhosa by throwing tobacco on to the ground and then firing on them. This was never forgotten and was the spark of one hundred years of conflict.



PANEL 44: The Battle of Rini, saw a united Xhosa front attack Willshire's British troops to the east of Grahamstown. A chance return of a Khoi-khoi corps when all seemed lost for the British, turned the battle and the Xhosa were routed. It is said the stream of the town turned red with the blood of the Xhosa.



PANEL 57: In May 1856, the young prophetess Nongqawuse was visited by Xhosa ancestors at Gxara River. They instructed the prophetess to tell her people to kill their cattle and leave their fields untilled. If this was done, the white people would be driven into the sea and the New People (ancestors) would revisit the world of the living. It is said the sky was dark with vultures devouring the rotting meat.



PANEL 61: Following their defeat in 1879, the Xhosa people were driven northwards over the Kei River. Households carried their possessions hundreds of miles in the exodus and many children perished on the way.





history of an infant democracy



While the original Keiskamma Tapestry presents a history of the Eastern Cape, it is, as South Africa celebrates ten years of democracy, a continuing story. As catalytic as the 1994 elections were in restoring dignity to the people of South Africa, so have the following ten years generated similar impact. Rural marginalisation has been tackled and key social services extended into previously remote areas. However, not everything is to be celebrated and new social challenges have arisen. This is a natural story of a country grappling with a hard-fought freedom. The Keiskamma Democracy Tapestry illustrates these tensions with an authentic flair, as the women artists of the Keiskamma Art Project depict their own experiences of South African democracy within the immediate timescale of its first ten years.

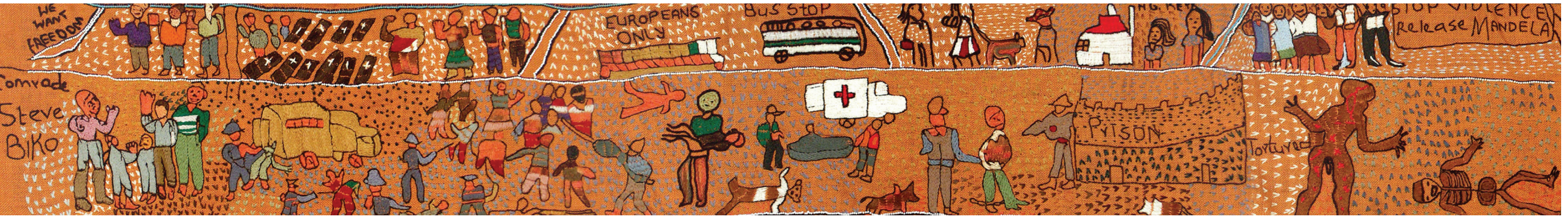
"Let us make what we know. We are living in a democracy. We want to be honest in telling our story, so we have included the bad. It is important for us to make this tapestry so that our children can know what it was like in a new democracy."

NOKWANDA MAKUBALO, Keiskamma Art Project

At fifty metres in length, the Keiskamma Democracy Tapestry comprises fourteen storyboard panels and five portraits. The panels depict various experiences of the democratic South Africa from the rural perspective of Hamburg and its neighbouring villages. The portraits are of past and present heroes of the liberation struggle, who in the hearts of the local communities, sacrificed much in the fight for the freedom enjoyed by all today. The tapestry finishes with the familiar image of the sheltering tree, protecting all of South Africa's people, who are once again joined hand-in-hand in celebration.

"We wanted to show the changing of our lives for the better after the 1994 elections."

NOSETI MAKUBALO, Keiskamma Art Project



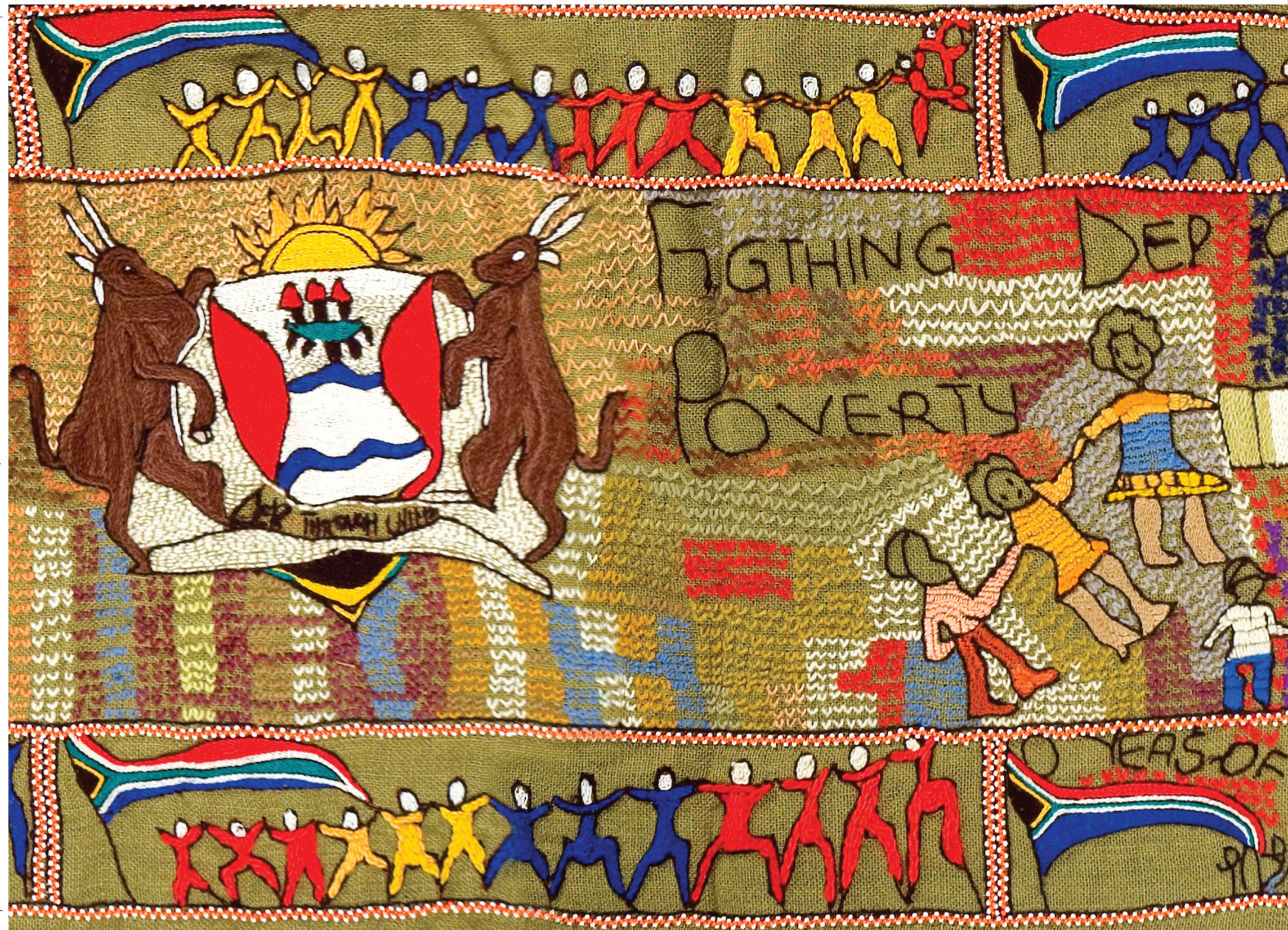
PANEL 65 & 66: Humiliation and subjugation continued in the form of Apartheid during the 1900s. Xhosa leaders such as Nelson Mandela were imprisoned, and others like Steve Biko died in police custody. These leaders gave hope of a united South Africa, while their ideas were suppressed by the white Nationalist government.



PANEL 69: April 1994 witnessed freedom for all South Africans in the country's first democratic elections. Contrary to the expectation of many, the elections were peaceful and well managed. The voice of the people was finally heard.



the keiskamma democracy tapestry



the keiskamma cream tapestry



a history retold



In the telling of a story there are reinterpretations, and even new presentation. And so it is with the original 126 metre Keiskamma Tapestry.

With a history as rich as that of the Eastern Cape, there were natural nuances and "stories within stories", which the women artists of the Keiskamma Art Project were eager to relate. Their response was a second tapestry, not as ornate or monumental as the first, but which used different embroidery styles with differing perspectives on the same history, all resulting in a colourful and diverse narrative. The telling of this history is lent further detail by the incorporation of both text throughout the tapestry and larger, simpler, images than those used in the Keiskamma Tapestry.

The Keiskamma Cream Tapestry is currently travelling throughout South Africa as part of an Alliance Francaise roving exhibition.

DEVELOPING A NEW TRADITION

While the Keiskamma Tapestry borrowed an idea from the Bayeux Tapestry, it also nurtured new styles of embroidery that were infused with original Xhosa techniques. In a similar pattern, the Keiskamma Cream Tapestry has adopted these styles and further infused traditional practices such as appliquéd black shoelace borders in geometric designs, mother of pearl buttons and Xhosa beadwork.

Like the Keiskamma Tapestry, hand-dyed wool from Southseas mohair is used, and, in this instance, applied to a cream-coloured Hessian base.

"We want to show how we are coming from the darkness into the light ... how our hope brings life. We were in the dark. We were hungry, but we created our future. We've grown back. We have restored our lives."

NOKWANDA MAKUBALO, Keiskamma Art Project

